The Cohen Center: Developing an Allocative Resource

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The Cohen Center Story

Nearly half a century ago, Dr. Ralph Cohen began the quarterly publication of the New Literary History, a journal that presented unique perspectives from world-renowned scholars on a particular issue, in order to promote the collaborative nature of academe. The journal received international acclaim and several prestigious awards, and Cohen began mirroring the journal’s mission in the classroom. Cohen began a center to engage in interdisciplinary inquiry on the University of Virginia’s campus in 1994, where further explorations into the interconnectedness of knowledge and the origins of discipline could take place. In 2013, Cohen brought his passion and vision to James Madison University with the introduction of the Cohen Center. The Cohen Center offers a place for disciplines to take a backseat to foundational inquiries about nature and technology, science and the arts, and many other varied subjects. Graduate students and faculty are invited to engage in their own study in the Cohen Center space, attend guest lectures and brown bag lunches, and even enroll in four-week, interdisciplinary-lensed short courses to explore issues beyond the curriculum. The Cohen Center welcomes all who are driven by a love of learning and a passion for inquiry.

The Cohen Center Connections

Thus goes the story of the Cohen Center; a physical space located in Wilson Hall Room 107, yet a philosophy Dr. Ralph Cohen and Dr. Larry Burton intend to spread well beyond the walls of James Madison University. Dr. Ralph Cohen, the visionary behind the Cohen Center, is the chief financial supporter for the center’s endeavors, while Dr. Larry Burton, the Cohen Center Director, works to make Cohen’s vision a reality. Together they advocate for something neglected in university systems; a graduate
education unrestricted by the boundaries of discipline. In order to achieve such a vision, the two professors continue to build on the support system they have today. Their connections currently comprise of a diverse board of advisors, JMU’s The Graduate School, and the Graduate Student Association.

The support staff begins with the Cohen Center Advisory Board. Members include: Melissa Aleman, Interim Dean of the Graduate School, David Brakke, Dean of the College of Science and Mathematics, Sarah Cheverton, Director of the Center for Instructional Technology, David Ehrenpreis, Director of the Institute for Visual Studies, Michael Galgano, Professor of History, Bill Hawk, Professor of Philosophy, Gregg Henriques, Professor of Psychology, George Sparks, Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and several others. The advisory board reflects a variety of perspectives and allows the Cohen Center unique access into the many different tracks of graduate study.

In addition to a strong and diverse group of advisory board members, the Cohen Center also partners with The Graduate School to help strengthen graduate education’s prominence on JMU’s campus. This continues to be of benefit to the Cohen Center, because increasingly it is difficult to promote events without an existing network of connections. Interim Deans Melissa Aleman and Michael Stoloff act in a guiding capacity as the Cohen Center carves out a space within the university system, and Aleman and Stoloff even facilitated a new connection between the Cohen Center and the Graduate Student Association (GSA). The Cohen Center hosts GSA monthly meetings and supports GSA events like the Graduate Student Symposium and GSA Lock-Ins. This relationship has already led to students’ increased interest in the Cohen Center.
The Cohen Center’s developing relationship with graduate students will continue growing with the center’s offering of two graduate student assistantships for the 2015-2016 school year. One graduate assistant will focus predominately on web-based promotion, updating the blog and Facebook to promote Cohen Center events. The other graduate assistant will take on an active role in networking with other organizations across campus and work to develop interdisciplinary workshops, seminars, and brownbag lunches. The graduate students will also assist in whatever capacity needed to support Cohen and Burton’s own endeavors.

**Organizational Communication**

The Cohen Center is a new organization with only two active members, so intraorganizational communication would seemingly be a nonissue. It is because of Burton and Cohen’s highly cohesive dyadic relationship, however, that problems arise when the center’s vision is not fully grasped by outsiders. Burton and Cohen understand each other and share a clear vision, and they grow frustrated in outside conversations when they feel this vision is either being misconstrued or not fully recognized. Other parties attempting to realize the Cohen Center vision sometimes also grow frustrated because they feel like they are not given a clear picture or an adequate chance to assist in the organization’s development. Burton and Cohen show a level of flexibility in their conversations but are unwavering in their desire to promote an interdisciplinary area of inquiry for graduate students and faculty. If outside perspectives do not fully recognize this aspect of the center, the perceptions and relationships of the center may be damaged.

It is difficult to build an organization with something as complex as the Cohen Center’s vision. Individuals who do not fully understand the center are not apt to get
involved, and those with misconceptions of the center may get involved only to find out the center is not what they anticipated. A prime example of this tension is with the Cohen Center mission statement:

_The Center is addressed to graduate faculty and graduate students as it provides experiences beyond the curriculum. The Cohen Center brings faculty and students together to discuss issues other than the curriculum. Education can extend beyond the University. The mission of the Cohen Center is to bridge the relationships between nature and technology, between science and the arts. Such a relation has existed fragmentarily, without a view of the varied subjects. The Cohen Center will study the interrelationships of action between human and animal life, of cyborgs and the artificial, of interdisciplinary groups. The Center welcomes the study of a discipline that becomes other than its origin. In its openness to language, the Center will encourage the displacement of particular disciplines. The Center is especially interested in the changes a language undergoes, especially like rhetoric as it becomes photography and film._

Burton and Cohen devised a mission statement that they believe truly represents the center, yet others have suggested altering or shortening the mission statement to make it more accessible to the JMU community. The mission statement certainly is atypical in length, but if it represents the Cohen Center’s mission than it should not be changed. The Cohen Center is seeking assistance that will further the Cohen Center vision rather than alter or tailor the vision in a way that the outsider thinks is more productive. Burton and Cohen make it clear that while interorganizational communication practices, publicity, and events can be altered, their mission is not to be touched. With the recognition of the
scope and difficulties inherent in furthering the center’s mission, one is now able to employ organizational communication theory to propose a plan of action.

**Structuration Theory as Related to the Cohen Center**

Structuration theory’s major conceptions and assumptions are rooted in the notion of duality of structure; meaning structure is both the medium and outcome of human action. Structures do not exist outside of action but can control action through their production and reproduction. The Cohen Center is continuing to build their own structure through continued interaction both internally and externally, and they consistently (re)produce their organization goals through these interactions. Examples of such interactions take place when Burton and Cohen communicate with the Graduate School or the Graduate Student Association members. The interactions influence and are influenced by JMU’s social environment, meaning the current communication of organizational members are what provides the center its structure. Moreover, inherent in the interactions are organized sets of rules and resources that act as stocks of knowledge. These organized sets of rules and resources make up what is known as the structural level. The next level, or systems level, contains the (re)production of these structures through the regular patterned social practices of organizations. Structuration is the final level, and here the structuring of social relations is considered across time and space.

While a complex and interwoven meta-theoretical framework, structuration’s lens allows for a unique analysis into the rules and resources drawn on by others who take part in system practices. In other words, people’s interactions with the Cohen Center are guided by their rules (principles or routines) and their resources (material and nonmaterial items used to guide their actions). With a mission as unique as the Cohen
Center, people who draw on existing sets of knowledge may not be able to adequately relate to the mission or view its productivity as an organization. As structuration theory suggests, these individuals continue to reproduce the system and structure thus potentially misconstruing or even damaging the Cohen Center’s own growth. The rules and resources, therefore, are critical in facilitating the interactions and giving power to the Cohen Center’s mission. While rules and resources are highly interwoven and contingent on other factors, they remain an accessible area that can be shaped to better express the given structure of the Cohen Center.

**Developing Rules and Resources**

In structuration theory, rules are the formal and informal codes of interactions, and the Cohen Center has several significant rules that express the organization’s structure. One formal rule of the center is that any idea needs approval by both Burton and Cohen before being enacted. Another formal rule suggests that all events, communication, and ideas should be related to the center’s mission. Informal rules evident in my analysis included a support for graduate student endeavors whenever possible, and not being afraid to end conversations with more questions than answers.

Rules should not be divorced from resources, and the Cohen Center’s resources also give the organization shape. Structuration theory identifies two different types of resources, material resources involved in the generation of power known as allocative resources and non-material resources known as authoritative resources. With regards to authoritative resources, the Cohen Center draws on the knowledge and experiences of Burton and Cohen to shape their organization. Cohen’s experiences as the creator of the New Literary History Journal and the University of Virginia interdisciplinary center helps
give the Cohen Center legitimacy, and Cohen and Burton’s impressive bodies of research also validates the center’s mission.

The allocative resources, however, are largely absent from the Cohen Center. The Cohen Center’s newness and absence of any publicity materials, social media presence, and instructional forms hinder the material expression of the organizational structure. Furthermore, the other rules and resources are not as evident because of the lack of material resources. This leads to increased difficulty gaining and using power to express the Cohen Center’s structure. While fully developing a detailed allocative resource plan is outside the scope of this project, one allocative resource was developed to both act as a template for future resource development and to begin generating power through the clear expression of the Cohen Center’s legitimacy and utility.

The Cohen Center of JMU

In the spirit of the Cohen Center’s interdisciplinary mission, I partnered with Jennifer Oskin, a first year Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication Graduate Student at JMU to assist in the development of the material resources. Jennifer and I met with Dr. Larry Burton and Dr. Ralph Cohen every Monday between January 26th through April 27th to gain as much insight as possible into their vision, their organizational structure, and a resource that would be useful for the immediate future. After the meetings with Burton and Cohen and conversations with members from the Cohen Center’s Board of Advisors, we agreed a brochure would be most beneficial.

Knowing the primary audience will be graduate students, we wanted to focus on expressing what the Cohen Center offers and how it is uniquely suited to fit the specific needs of a graduate student. Ideally, the brochure will be handed out at the new graduate
student orientation in the fall and provide a resource for students interested in interdisciplinary study. Information for graduate faculty was largely ignored in the development of the brochure, though we recognize the benefit of developing a similar brochure for such an audience. Through our continued analysis of the Cohen Center’s communication, mission, and goals, we were able to differentiate the Cohen Center’s unique offerings into three parts: graduate space, interdisciplinary short courses, and a lecture series. Each part directly reflects the type of structure the Cohen Center envisions for itself, and the identification and expression of these core aspects allows for greater clarity in future interactions surrounding the center.

**Graduate Space**

On the first panel inside the pamphlet, we designed a column to indicate what the Cohen Center’s physical space offers graduate students. Because JMU is primarily an undergraduate institution, graduate students who utilize the libraries or the student success center express a feeling of disconnect with their peers and a desire for a better, graduate student specific workspace. The Cohen Center provides such a space, only allowing graduate students access and equipping the room with comfortable chairs, long tables, and computer resources. The first panel of the pamphlet illustrates the potential for independent study and group work in Wilson 107, and the panel also states the space’s availability for graduate student meetings and brownbag discussions about academic-related topics. At the most basic level, promoting the physical space encourages recognition of the center and it’s everyday utility for the graduate student. Furthermore, interdisciplinary interaction will be able to take place organically as graduate students from a multitude of disciplines study across the table from each other.
Certificate Program

The second and middle panel on the pamphlet indicates the types of short courses offered at the center. While these short courses are still in development, Burton and Cohen envision a certificate program where graduate students from across programs come together to talk about a topic of significance. The Cohen Center is working closely with Dr. Lori Britt and graduate student Marie Eszenyi to design the types of short courses that exemplify the center’s vision. Three types of short courses are identified in on the panel including: research, social issue, and exploratory-based concentrations.

The research-based short course invites faculty already engaged in cross-disciplinary research to hold a short course on their research. The social issue-based short course takes an issue already being explored from a variety of lenses and brings professors and students who may not be interacting together. The third short course, the exploratory-based focus, takes an issue being neglected in academic study and unites different disciplines in order to explore and question the topic. Each short course reflects the mission of the Cohen Center and exemplifies Dr. Cohen’s vision.

Lecture Series

The final panel offers a list of distinguished faculty who will be presenting at JMU throughout the academic year. Each scholar represents an interdisciplinary approach to a human-centered problem and brings a plethora of experience and knowledge on a specific topic. Examples of last year’s lecturers include Philip Kitcher, a John Dewey professor of philosophy interested in exploring ethics as a human project, and Langdon Winner, the Chair of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute who is interested in the myth of innovation. These lecturers
demonstrate the power of interdisciplinary inquiry and exhibit the type of research endeavors the Cohen Center supports.

Conclusion

The back middle panel of the pamphlet offers a story of Dr. Ralph Cohen, one similar to the narrative at the beginning of this document. Within this story lies the inspiration of the Cohen Center and the vision for a future of study; one unconstrained by our discipline’s boundaries and devoted to questioning the very nature of knowledge. The complexity and untraditional nature of this vision limits the center’s immediate appeal to JMU students and faculty, but continued production and reproduction of the center’s rules and resources will promote the center’s potential. By developing an allocative resource, a pamphlet intended for the incoming graduate student, the Cohen Center will no longer be viewed as novel or unnecessary on JMU’s campus. The Cohen Center’s use as a study space appeals to graduate students immediately, and getting students in the door will foster interdisciplinary interaction and promote the center’s mission organically. The short courses offer something for students interested in study outside their program’s boundaries, and the certificate of completion is appealing for those building their CVs. Finally the lecturer program will show what students can do when they adopt the Cohen Center’s vision of graduate study. The pamphlet is a small aspect of the Cohen Center’s continued development of rules and resources, but initiatives such as this pamphlet will continue emphasizing the center’s necessity and insure its vitality for many years to come.